

Spiritual Foundation for Civic Education

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While the challenge of promoting civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions is an ever-present one, there currently seems to be an increased interest in the field of civic education. At the recent Congressional Conferences on Civic Education, the first of five yearly meetings (two have already met), research reports were presented that document what we all know very well. Today's youth, by and large, are not taking up the mantle of civic responsibility. From less civic engagement in community efforts, to acquiring political knowledge both of our founding principles and of the civic challenges of the day, to voting and performing other civic activities, the level of youth engagement is wanting. The literature backing these trends is considerable and in agreement. Conferences and meetings like the one in Washington attest to the concern that responsible Americans are placing on this state of affairs.

Tocqueville (Huntington, 2004) made the claim that in order for Americans to be civilly minded citizens, to be strongly motivated to engage in the affairs of our republic, they need a strong sense of religion. That religion mingles with other habits to formulate a civil religion. Huntington (2004) writes,

America's civil religion provides a religious blessing to what Americans feel they have in common. It is perfectly compatible with each American belonging to his or her own denomination, believing in a Christian or non-Christian god, or being Deist, as were several of the Founding Fathers. It is not compatible, however, with being atheist for it is a religion, invoking a transcendental Being apart from the terrestrial human world. (103)

Some have written of the sufficiency of the American Creed as being a unifying concept to build a basis of legitimacy and loyalty for a governmental arrangement in the context of our nation (e.g., Hunt and Metcalf, 1968). But those ideals have devolved into a legalistic conception, which emphasizes process over substance. Can one attribute the reluctance of citizens, including the youth of the nation, to be active participants in our civic life to such devolution? Do we need a more substantive

basis to instill the needed emotional commitments that lead to participation in the political process?

This concern seems more acute in the American context than in the European context. Elazar (1994) points out that the US is more in the tradition of a federalist democracy than a Jacobin democracy. The former relies on a more prominent civil society, whereas the latter depends more on the state to meet societal problems. As such, the US is highly dependent on ordinary citizens viewing their obligations to fellow citizens more comprehensively. This is ironic, given the simultaneous tradition of “American exceptionalism” (Lipset, 1996), which emphasizes the level of individualism characterizing the nation. The result is that if Americans are not encouraged with a strong source of emotional commitment which encourages communal ties, such as those promoted by mainstream religious beliefs, one is hard pressed to identify from where the needed civic motivation will emanate.

Although American political allegiance has relied on religious spirituality, there is a tension created by the explicit Constitutional separation between religion and the state. This separation includes a prohibition in binding religion to the operations of our public school system, including its curricular content. Therefore, a basis to promote morality in our curriculum must be found outside the parameters of religion if the rudimentary requirements of civic education can be addressed. But the stirring of emotional commitment to the commonwealth is still lacking a source of psychic energy. This lack in a sense of a kindred spirit to a meaningful degree deprives our curriculum a motivational foundation for a civic approach to learning. This relates not only to the content associated with civic education, but also to the content across the whole curriculum.

Despite the Constitutional provisions of separation contained in the First Amendment, the nation’s public schools unabashedly promoted the Anglo-Protestant view of citizenship and morality up to the 1960s. Since those days the Supreme Court, immigration from more diverse countries, and a strong movement, multiculturalism, has strongly challenged and, for the most part, done away with this curricular element in public schools (Hunter, 2000). Without any consensus or legal standing to replace the Anglo-Protestant foundation, religion has been de-legitimized in relation to civic education. With this de-legitimization of religion there has been the added challenge in the disempowerment of local communities, another supportive institutional element (Etzioni, 1993). Here, the rise of national corporations, national unions, and the national media and the explosion in federal government prowess in addressing societal woes has rendered the view of the local as less viable. Add to this what such writers as Friedman (2000) claims that we are now truly in a “globalized” world, local socializing agents are in danger of being totally neutralized. The new realities of our social world, isolation in the suburbs and alienation in the inner cities, have stripped us of the sources in which one could develop the emotional ties with our fellow citizens.

Emotions are potentially very strong forces. Given the secular nature of our modern and post modern realities, those educators who are involved in civic education must develop a secular basis of spirituality that can be utilized in our public

schools. For this purpose, spirituality can be defined as that emotional state that allows the individual to transcend the material concerns of the world and feel as one with other fellow citizens of the community, the nation, and even the world. Such spirituality should not hold religious spirituality as a mutually exclusive consciousness, but it should be able to stand on its own, not dependent on religious beliefs. The steps leading to a secular spirituality could be built on experiences where students engage with others, first in small and local settings and progressively in bigger setting over larger areas. While out of sync with modern social conditions and modern popular culture, our civic educators can attempt such a bold initiative. Public and political participation is not dead in our society and such events as 9/11 remind us of our mutual vulnerabilities. The emotional forces that motivate some are not necessarily religious. This approach is highly conducive with federalist democracy. It first relies on the need and acceptance of a secular view of morality.

Let me say that I profoundly respect and support the constitutional provisions for the separation of church and state. I am fully in support of the obstacles against proselytizing in our public schools. But that does not mean we should have a civic education that pretends to be neutral on values and morals. I believe that public schools can teach a moral position. When advocating such a stance, the immediate concern one hears is whose values and morals? I believe our founding fathers, in their profound wisdom, provide an answer.

The structure of the *US Constitution* makes it a compact. This structure comes from the covenants that organized congregational churches in pre colonial times and, in turn, originated from the Judeo tradition. Covenants are documents that contain solemn pledges of unity in which the pledged parties swear to uphold the provisions of the covenant irrespective of what any of the parties might do or not do. A covenant calls on God to witness such unions. A compact is such a pledge without calling on God as a witness. As the political scientist, Lutz (1988), points out, an analysis of the founding documents from the time of the *Mayflower Compact* (which was a covenant) point out that the founding framers of our republic were very conscious of this meaning. That is why we treat the *Constitution* with such solemnity.

A closer view, though, brings out a very important development in my eyes. The *Declaration of Independence* is a covenant. The *United States Constitution* is a compact. There is no mention of a higher power in the *Constitution*. The only mention of religion, in effect, limits its influence while protecting it from government interference. I believe the founding fathers were admonishing us with the words “to promote a more perfect union” to create a moral foundation on the basis of a secular morality. Such a claim, I understand, can be controversial and is not meant to argue with the generally religious sense of the nation at the time or since. This secular morality was not to interfere with the general sense of morality emanating from established religions, but was to be one which the civic politic could count on no matter what the personal moral beliefs of individuals might be. While the *Constitution* establishes the basis for our law, not our morality, in doing so it also reflects who we are as a

people, our constitution, and our basic cultural beliefs. This view of ourselves is further enhanced by the *Bill of Rights*. As I tried to convey to my high school students, a national constitution is the ideals of a culture meeting the practical realities of our politics. Central to creating a more perfect union is creating the structure, not only of government, but of a society that promotes its own survival and advancement. The criteria defining advancement are determined by the posterity of the founding generation. Within that mandate, one can determine from experience certain principles that need to be respected in order for survival and advancement to proceed. These principles can be expressed in terms of values. They would include liberty, equality, justice, loyalty, disposition to work in communities, private property, honesty, and so forth (Gutierrez, 2001). Civic education should be based on a definite set of values not from those in power deciding what they should be, not from religious theology, but from a non-ending study of what has led societies to survive and advance. We read of such a study when we consider the references our founding generation made in their pamphlets and other written works (Wood, 1998). In similar fashion, we should not be shy of our moral commitment to the principles of the *Constitution*, particularly to its invitation, or is it its expectation, for us to engage in this moral process, which in part is very settled and in part is open to debate and discussion.

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